

Sermon, Lent 5C, April 7, 2019, Jane A. Beebe

John 12:1-8

12:1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

12:2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

12:3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

There are some foods where the fragrance is almost as good—or even better—than the food itself. There's coffee, of course. Then there is apple pie. All of my mother's fruit pies were special. She made blueberry, rhubarb, blackberry, occasionally strawberry or peach. But her absolute best was apple pie. I like to bake pies myself sometimes. Regretfully, I will never have her light and quick hand with the pastry dough. To develop that, one must bake pies on a regular basis—a dangerous activity. My mother seemed able to just throw them together—but with wonderful results. Actually eating the pie was great. (And there are schools of thought as to what goes best with apple pie: sharp cheese or vanilla ice cream?) The scent of it, baking? Sublime!

I am, for good or ill, the product of having watched many Hanna-Barbera and Looney Toons cartoons. There is a cartoon image that I love. In it, a cartoon

character is shown being physically lifted off the ground, to float toward whatever is giving off the lovely fragrance. The scent itself becomes another cartoon character with hands. A vapor finger may beckon the person to follow the scent to its source. Where does the fragrance of this story lead us? How does it lift us?

There is something so compelling about the sheer extravagance of Mary of Bethany's actions. Yet, in many Gospel stories, we have seen God's abundance demonstrated again and again. One of Jesus' first miracles is to turn water into wine at the wedding at Cana. The steward pronounces it the best wine. At the feeding of the five thousand, not only were all fed, there was food left over: many baskets full. When Jesus is in the boat with Peter and the other fisherman, their nets become so full of fish they begin to break.

Yes, absolutely, the poor must be fed. One commentary I read suggested that when Jesus says, "You always have the poor with you..." (John 12:8) he means *keep* the poor with you: care for them. Jesus is referring to Deuteronomy chapter 15 that says, "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land." (Deuteronomy 15:11) This is inherent in Jesus' command to us to love our neighbors as ourselves. God cares always for all aspects of our wellbeing: body, mind, and spirit. There is that poignant exchange between Peter and Jesus. "Peter,

do you love me?” “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” “Feed my lambs.” (John 21:15) Peter has witnessed God’s abundance first-hand.

Today is the last Sunday in Lent. Is there a time for devotion to Jesus—in his divinity certainly, yet in his humanity as well? Is there time to contemplate what Jesus is about to accomplish? Mary of Bethany demonstrates this devotion and contemplation so beautifully. Later, we will hear how Jesus washes the feet of His disciples. God comes this close to us to care for us: kneeling at our feet. Do we dare to approach God this closely? Mary dares. We see Mary in another scene where she sits at her Teacher’s feet, listening to his wisdom. (And let’s not forget Martha who prepares the meals). This time it is Judas who protests, not her sister. Again Jesus says, “Let her alone...” Once again, she is taking the better part. In a deep understanding of what is about to happen to Jesus, she may already be grieving. She is paying attention. We are told that the nard is costly. It is worth a full year’s wages. Yet what was the cost for Jesus? Mary dries Jesus’ feet with her hair. Surely there were towels available? (She is at home after all). She offers her whole self. Jesus offers his body to be broken. Jesus wept for Lazarus. Like Mary, may we weep for Him?

Extravagance is appropriate in the face of death. We know the whole story of Jesus’ death and resurrection. We will hear it again soon. But we are in an in-between time in which the resurrection has not yet happened. There is its promise

in the story of Lazarus when he is brought back to life. Perhaps this family gathering and meal we hear about today is a celebration of Lazarus' restoration. If we place ourselves in the middle of today's story, we do not yet know if there will be a resurrection. Jesus is still with us. Can we not care for Jesus, Jesus himself?

I have experienced this kind of extravagant care. In my father's last days—he died a little over four years ago in a skilled nursing center at his retirement community—I remember two dining services staff particularly. One was a lady who regularly brought my father meals in his room. The day before he died, he lapsed into a coma. She brought his meal anyway. She explained that it was her way of grieving. It was what she knew how to do, it was what she could offer. The other was the head of dining services. I had had conversations with him on the phone as he had been an important member of my father's care team. I wrote several short poems about my father's last days as a kind of journal. Here is the one I wrote for them. I just called it: "Food."

Food

"Please let us feed you. It is our way
of grieving." I drink the sweet tea,
eat the fried shrimp,
the white rice with cheese (and the merest trace
of broccoli).

I feel better.

“I am bringing him lunch. I know he cannot possibly eat it.” (It is what I know how to do. Adherence to routine brings me to those rooms I do not want to enter).

I leave the covered plate on the table. It is food indeed. I understand consecration.

I still remember how good that food smelled, how the extra serotonin healed and sustained me. There is something about fragrance that gets past our defenses, that can connect us to special memories. I learned that John’s telling of the story of Mary anointing Jesus’s feet is the only one that mentions the fragrance of the perfumed oil. It fills the whole house! It is interesting to me that in the chapter before, when we hear Lazarus’ resurrection story, we are told that Lazarus had been in the tomb long enough to, well, stink! Yet in Mary’s prescient, prophetic act, we experience Jesus’ imminent death as a marvelous scent. What an evocative way to express that life in Jesus overcomes death? You may be familiar with the places in the Psalms where God’s Word is described as sweet?

There are also a few places in Scripture (besides today’s Gospel) that refer to fragrance or perfume. In Proverbs it says, “Perfume and incense make the heart

glad...” (Proverbs 27:9) In the Song of Solomon, the bride exclaims, “...Your name is perfume poured out...” (Song of Solomon 1:3) The words of my favorite Offertory sentence come from Ephesians: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Jesus’ offering is fragrant. In 2 Corinthians Paul says, “But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.” Knowing Jesus has a fragrance; we can exude that fragrance ourselves. May the fragrance of Mary’s nard lead us to Christ’s presence.